

Pandemic Studies

for you/your small group



What does the Bible say to some of the questions raised by Coronavirus?

Tim Sutton

WEEK 1 – Is the Pandemic God’s Judgement?

Guidance

- *Have a time of sharing and group prayer at the beginning of your time together.*
- *Read the introduction.*
- *Read the passage and then questions out loud*
- *After the study, read the Application section out loud*
- *Close with a final prayer*

Introduction

The nations have once again been shaken (Haggai 2:6/Hebrews 12:26-29). One of the most important questions we could be asking right now is what God thinks about the Coronavirus Pandemic and whether he is at work in some way in and through it. This side of eternity we will probably never be able to fully know the answer to that question (Romans 11:33). However, as Jesus says (in Luke 12:56-57), just as we can interpret weather patterns by looking at the sky, so we can interpret something of the ways of God in the world.

There are plenty of conspiracy theories around these days, so we do well to listen what God says through Isaiah (8:12) "Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it." More than anything else we need to allow the Bible and the Holy Spirit to be our guides on the journey, and also to listen discerningly to people who listen to God in this way, rather than getting our main ideas and input from Social Media.

Three books have been really helpful to my own reflections: 'Where is God in a Coronavirus World,' by John Lennox - Lennox is an apologist and this book is especially helpful for those new to or beginning to explore the Christian faith or for those who want to help others; 'Coronavirus + Christ,' by John Piper - Piper unsurprisingly approaches the issue in a deeply bible centred way, through the idea of the Sovereignty of God; and 'God and the Pandemic' by Tom Wright - written in his usual intelligent and compassionate way. The godly authors each approach the subject differently, would disagree sometimes with one another's conclusions, but have all stimulated my own thinking. The following is an attempt to produce a short set of simple studies, for a complex subject, to help our church family understand the times and act accordingly. May God bless and lead you as you engage with the questions.

Today's study is about God's judgement. Some of us will have heard, or maybe even said ourselves, that the Coronavirus pandemic is in some way God's judgement on a sinful world.

Let the group begin by each sharing if they think the pandemic is God's judgement and giving their reasons why...

Bible Reading: Luke 13:1-5

Explanation

In this passage Jesus is answering a question about a tragedy that had happened. It involved the bloodthirsty slaughter by the Romans of some Galilean Jews. In his answer, Jesus also mentions another tragedy – the collapse of a tower, causing the death of 18 people. We could say that the first tragedy was a moral evil – cause by the sinful actions of others; and the second was a natural disaster or evil. The pandemic falls into the category of natural evil.

Questions

- Looking at verses 2-4, what do you think was the popular assumption of why these two disasters had happened?
- How does Jesus respond?
- To what [about themselves] does he draw their attention?
- Jesus is basically saying to the people, No, those who died in these ways were not worse ... than YOU. John Piper puts it this way, “Let’s not talk about the dead; let’s talk about *you*. This is more urgent. What happened to them is about *you*. Your biggest issue is not *their* sin but *your* sin. I think that’s God’s message for the world in this coronavirus outbreak. He’s calling the world to repentance while there is time.” (p80)

So, from Luke 13:1-5 we see that Jesus does not go along with the line that bad things happening to people always equals God’s judgement. Now let’s briefly look at the following passages before we make our final conclusions. Yes or no...

- Read Psalm 73:2-14 – The Psalmist talks about living in a world where sometimes good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. When something bad happens to people, should we automatically conclude it is God's judgment? Yes or no?
- Read Romans 5:12 – Paul gives a summary of what happened through Adam's sin. In view of this, is all suffering and death caused by God? Yes or no?
- Read Acts 12:23 – Do bad things sometimes happen to bad people as an act of God's judgement? Yes or no?
- Read 1st Corinthians 11:23-32 – Some of the Corinthian Christians died because of their sinful actions (so did Ananias and Saphira (Acts 5:1-11). God's judgement on his people is best understood not to be *punitive*, since Jesus took our punishment for us (Mark 14:36 and the cup of judgement), but rather *restorative*, it is discipline (Heb 12:4-11). So, does God sometimes carry out specific judgments on people? Yes or no?
- Read Job 1:12 – God is sovereign ruler over all creation. Nothing happens without his agreement. Does God ultimately have to give permission for all things to happen, good or bad? Yes or no?

Read this Conclusion... but not until you've answered the questions above 😊

I hope you got the point and answered no, no, yes, yes, yes! It is not as simple as bad things happening to bad people. We live in a world ravaged by the consequences of human sin – diseases, wars, and everything evil. It is true that nothing – good or evil – happens without God's permission. But the answer given by Jesus here in Luke 13:1-5 seems to be that natural disasters – such as Coronavirus – are to be seen as reminders of our own mortality, and a wake-up call to our often proud world to be right with God, rather than as arbitrary zaps of judgment from an angry heaven.

Application

Has this study changed your previously held views or not? In light of what Jesus teaches us here in Luke, think of how the pandemic has been a wake-up call to YOU. Has it prompted you to love God and others more? What are you going to do differently because of it?

Close

End your time with a prayer and remind each other when the next session is.

WEEK 2 – Is the Pandemic a Sign of the Times/the Second Coming?

Introduction

Christians are people of faith, hope and love. The middle bit is quite important. Hope doesn't mean we simply try to be positive, it's a theological word, referring to our eager expectation of the return of Jesus, our eternal resurrected life with him (1 Corinthians 15:51f), and life in the new heaven and earth (2 Peter 3:13). The exact order and sequence of these events has been debated by Christians for 2000 years. All sorts of schools of thought have developed, sometimes under the titles 'Pre-Millennialism,' Post-Millennialism,' and 'A-Millennialism,' to name a few. Don't worry if these terms are not familiar to you – St Peter will not be standing at the pearly gates giving you a multiple-choice test on them before you enter!

One thing has *not* been up for debate in mainstream Christian belief: the fact that Jesus *will* come back and that these things *will* happen. We read, for example, in Acts 1:10-11 that when Jesus ascended to heaven, this happened to the Apostles: *“They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’”*

In today's study we will try not to get bogged down in the 'isms' referred to above. Our primary question is whether the Coronavirus is telling us in some way that the Second Coming of Jesus is near.

Bible Reading: Matthew 24:1-14 & v30, v44

Explanation

Matthew 24 is one of the New Testament's most complex chapters. In it Jesus answers the two questions of verse 3 – the timing of the destruction of the temple and the timing of his return. Godly people differ as to which of the next verses are answering each question. Many think that verses 4-28 are mainly Jesus' answer to the first question and that in verses 29 onwards he is answering the second one. Prophecy in both Old and New Testaments often has more than one event/fulfilment in mind. However we may personally understand this chapter, it is clear that Jesus is forecasting troubling times and his ultimate, triumphal return. His prophecy was partially fulfilled in AD70 with the terrible destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

Questions

- What is your emotional reaction to the reading in Matthew 24?
- How do you react to the idea of Jesus coming back?
- John Lennox lists the global plagues and pandemics that have occurred down the centuries:

The Plague of Galen struck from AD and is thought to have been measles or smallpox, killing around 5 million people. The Plague of Justinian occurred AD 541-542. It was a bubonic disease that left over 25 million dead. A further bubonic plague that came to be known as the Black Death struck from 1346-1353, and somewhere between 70 – 100 million people died; the global population shrunk by 20%. In the 19th and 20th centuries cholera pandemics killed more than a million. It's also well known that between 1918-1920 a flu pandemic took the lives of 50 million people globally; Asian flu struck from 1956-1958 and claimed 2 million lives; Hong Kong flu took a further million from 1968-69. The AIDS pandemic has so far killed 32 million people (p10).

- All this being the case, can we say that pandemics are 'a sign of the times' or a clear indication that Jesus is about to come back?

- What does Jesus say about global calamities, v8? Try to fully unpack the analogy/words Jesus uses.
- What should people do in the light of Christ's return, vv42-49? Again, try to unpack this. How does being ready and watchful differ from being fixated on events and dates?
- What are some of the dangers of over-hyping the second coming?
- What are the dangers of underplaying the reality of the second coming?

Extra Bible Reading: Romans 8:18-26

Explanation

In these verses the Apostle Paul picks up on Jesus' analogy of birth pains. Birth pains are the result of a body that is aching to bring forth new life – in this case, the new heaven and earth. Paul talks about three sets of 'birth groanings' – the groaning of Creation (v22), the groaning of the Church (v23), and the groaning of the Spirit (v26).

Tom Wright warns us against a triumphalist attitude and suggests that we need to learn from this sequence of events. Rather than rubbing our hands together and saying 'Aha – the end is nigh, we told you so!', or indifferently declaring Coronavirus to be God's judgment on the bad people around us, we should admit that we, too - although we are hope-filled - are broken/groaning. He suggests that we should do what it says here in Romans 8:26 - admit our own lack of understanding, and together with those around us in the world, lament and pray (p42-43).

What do you think about that kind of response?

Application

Has this study changed any of your previously held views? If so, how?

This week think about your response to the birth pains and groaning that Coronavirus represents. Work out what it means for you personally to be watchful and ready for Jesus' return.

Close

End your time thanking the Lord Jesus that he really is coming again and that will be with him, and one another, FOREVER (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)! Remind each other when the next session is.

WEEK 3 - What should we do in response to these things?

Introduction

In the first few months of the Pandemic, it was not difficult to see the emergence of good and positive things, set against the backdrop of the fear, illness and loss faced by so many. People were discovering the joy of being and having good neighbours once again, families were spending more time together, the air was less polluted, wildlife was flourishing. There was talk of not wanting to lose these important things once the Pandemic was over.

Church has changed, too. Some of the changes are negative. People are isolated and not meeting up regularly with the wider fellowship. We have not been able to express our praise and worship through communal singing. But there have been positive changes too.

Today we will look at 2 Bible passages and think one more time about our response to the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Let us see this as a God given opportunity to live differently. But what kind of differently?

1. First Bible Reading: John 20:19-21

Explanation

It was Resurrection Sunday and the disciples were all holed up together, hidden away behind locked doors. Not because they were afraid of catching something, but of being caught. And to these fearful followers of Jesus comes the Risen Lord with words of comfort and challenge.

Questions

- What comfort does Jesus offer here, and have you ever experienced the reality of it?
- What challenge has he given? Let the group members share if they feel it's a challenge they personally have accepted.
- What does 'As the Father has sent me' really mean? How was Jesus sent and what does that mean for us as disciples?

2. An Interesting Quote from Martin Luther from a letter written in 1527

“With God’s permission the enemy has sent poison and deadly dung amongst us, and so I will pray to God that he may be gracious and preserve us. Then I will fumigate to purify the air, give and take medicine, and avoid places and persons where I am not needed in order that I may not abuse myself and that through me others may not be infected and inflamed with the result that I become the cause of their death through my negligence. If God wishes to take me, he will be able to find me. At least I have done what he gave me to do and am responsible neither for my own death nor for the death of others. But if my neighbour needs me, I shall avoid neither person nor place but feel free to visit and help him.”

Question

Go through Luther’s quote and say what you like or don’t like about what he says.

3. Second Bible Reading: Acts 1:8 & 8:1-8

Explanation

Scholars vary in their estimations, but many months and perhaps even up to 6 years have passed between Jesus’ command to be “witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth” and the disciples scattering to those places, spreading the gospel as they went. Why the delay? It’s so easy to get settled in our physical locality and in our faith. It seems to take the cataclysmic event of a violent persecution to get them going.

Questions

- In what ways might the Pandemic be thrusting Christians and churches out in mission? Is this happening? If so, how?
- As you look at what Christians and churches like yours have been doing over the past few months, what new things have been happening? Would those things have happened without the Pandemic?
- Vaccinations and immunisations are now on the horizon, but the social and economic effects of the Pandemic will be with us for years to come. What can and should we be doing to minister to these needs in Christ’s name?
- What have you learned through these past few months – lessons that you do not want to lose? Think first about yourself, personally; then think about the lessons we need to take away as a church.

Summary of the 3 Studies & Final Applications

After these three studies, we may have reached several conclusions:

First, the Pandemic can be thought of as a wake-up call to us who live in the 21st Century - we who thought that 'such a thing could never happen to us, because we're far too advanced scientifically for that;' we who rely on the NHS, the economy, and who have taken life for granted – and perhaps even thought that we didn't need God. How aware we have become of our own mortality and perhaps it has awoken many to thoughts of eternity. At such times we search our hearts and repent where necessary (Luke 13:5). Anything that prompts us to do that is an act of grace.

Second, the Pandemic may not be a sign that Jesus is about to return 'any minute now' – as if Pandemics and Plagues had not been happening for the past few thousand years BC and AD. It may, however, be seen as one of the 'beginnings of birth pains' spoken of by Jesus (Matthew 24:8) and Paul (Romans 8:22). Those birth pains will intensify before the great and awesome return of the Lord (2 Peter 3:10 & 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10). Coronavirus has reminded us that the groaning will one day cease, the Lord will return, and a new world will be born (2 Peter 3:13). It has made us think about our readiness – and that of our friends and loved ones – for that day. God's heart is for all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4) so he wants people to be ready to meet him.

Third, God is calling us through this Pandemic to step up our personal and church response as we continue to participate in his mission to the world around us.

None of us has all the answers to the big questions raised by the Coronavirus. Yet the Bible presents to us a God who is not only powerfully in control, but compassionately and deeply involved; who has himself entered into our broken world and has profoundly shared its suffering, through the cross of Christ. This is the God we can know, trust and love and who is worthy of our full attention and allegiance. Helping others to know him is the most important thing we could do with our lives.

Close

Pray and remind one another of the date of your next gathering

This week, draw up a simple action plan that will help you to put into practice what you have learned from these studies. Share this with a trusted friend or friends.

Bibliography

Coronavirus + Christ (John Piper, Crossway, 2020)

God and the Pandemic (Tom Wright, SPCK, 2020)

Where is God in a Coronavirus World? (John C Lennox, The Good Book Company, 2020)

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